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ABSTRACT

A study examined critical literacy and how texts, transactions, and talk enabled girls to examine their positions as readers and negotiate their identities in relation to novel characters and one another. Participants were eight sixth-grade girls of European American, African American, and Latina backgrounds and the participant researcher, a white woman. The setting was the after-school program of an independent middle school in a large northeastern city. Participants selected, read, and discussed 4 young adult novels in an informal setting during 17 sessions. Data collection included Book Club meeting discussion audio tapes and four audio-taped individual participant interview sessions over a 9-month period. Transcriptions of all the audio tapes, along with three written responses, and observational notes of sessions, interviews, and an author visit, became the basis for analysis. Results indicated that preliminary analysis of the data pointed to Book Club as a site where early adolescent girls were able to raise their own agenda and negotiate their issues and identities, within the multiple positions of race, age, and culture, when the variable of gender was removed. (Contains 35 references.) (Author/CR)

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Book Club is 'Da Bomb': Early Adolescent Girls Engage With Texts, Transactions, and Talk, is based on a dissertation research study. The participants were eight sixth grade girls of European American, African American and Latina backgrounds and the participant researcher, a white woman. The setting was the after school program of an independent middle school in a large Northeastern city. The research focus was critical literacy: how texts, transactions and talk enable girls to examine their positions as readers and negotiate their identities in relation to novel characters and one another. Eight 6th grade girls and the researcher selected, read and discussed four young adult novels in an informal setting during 17 sessions.

Data collection included Book Club meeting discussion audio-tapes and four audio-taped individual participant interviews sessions over a nine month period. All audio tapes were transcribed. These transcriptions, along with three written responses and observational notes of sessions, interviews, and an author visit, became the basis for analysis.

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Book Club is 'Da Bomb': Early Adolescent Girls Engage With Texts, Transactions and Talk

Book Club was beginning its 9th session when I walked into our after school meeting room to see Luann writing the names of our group members under a heading, "Book Club is 'da Bomb'" on the chalk board. Several of the group members in my study revealed that talking about books wasn't something they would not ordinarily do. Allison thought an all-girls' group was a "put down," others thought it a little "nerdy" or odd. Yet, by the 9th session, even with two new members, a dynamic cohort had been formed, a place where intimate, honest talk, moving into and away from the young adult texts read, took place. Data analysis reveals that this particular reader response group allowed the 6th grade girls to move beyond textual analysis to reflection and a collaborative negotiation of their multiple roles as white, Black and Hispanic females in a privileged urban setting.

Theorists such as Iser (1980) and Rosenblatt (1976, 1980) contribute to an understanding of how readers assume particular stances and enter into transactions with literature, resulting in a "personally lived - through" response, based on the cognitive and affective elements of consciousness (Rosenblatt, 1980, p. 388). While many of these studies have focused on the individual and autonomous aspects of reading, studies in anthropology, education, and sociolinguistics have extended our understanding of various forms of reading as shared social practices, influenced by and influencing cultural norms (Cherland, 1994; Heath, 1983). One site of reading as a shared social practice is the activity that forms the basis for the present study: reader response groups or book clubs.

A number of studies which examine women and girls reading have been done in the United States, Canada and Great Britain. In each of these studies, a major focus is reading as a private act. Cherland,(1994) Christian-Smith, (1990, 1993), Radway,

(1984), and Walkerdine, (1984, 1990), look at girls and women reading in isolation.

They emphasize the social and cultural contexts for girls' and women's reading and the influence of these contexts upon readers' constructions of texts, especially the ideological nature of the text and its role in the reader's construction of stereotypical femininity. The readers in these studies were engaged with formulaic, popular texts: teen magazines (Finders, 1996), comics (Walkerdine, 1984) adult and young adult romance series (Radway, 1984; Christian-Smith, 1990) and popular horror novels (Cherland, 1994). While the individual researchers found that the characters and texts engaged their readers' desires, they also found that these texts constrained interpretations. Reading in isolation seemed to privatize the reading act and prevent critique (Christian-Smith, 1994).

These researchers of privatized and constrained reading suggest that these texts can be transformed by the reader, under the right conditions such as focused discussion (Christian-Smith, 1990; Finders, 1996). Other researchers have suggested the use of "oppositional" texts, such as those which allow students to "read against the grain," of traditional gender, class and racial sentiments in works for young people (Medway and Stibbs, 1990; Taxel, 1991).

The present study builds on this research by examining an all-girls' book discussion group facilitated by the researcher. Novels selected for reading and discussion were oppositional in that they were neither romance nor popular series texts but award winning young adult fiction that presented a variety of strong female characters who challenge the status quo. The target population for the study was a group of 6th grade girls in a middle school.

Research documents that girls may lose voice and "go underground" (Gilligan, 1990) or disconnect from school (AAUW, 1991) Fine and Zane (1991) as they begin to understand the implications of culture and gender for their lives, during the crucial period of early adolescence. Studies in the areas of language and literacy (Crawford

and Chaffin, 1980; Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990, 1993; Schweickart, 1986) suggest that talk and reading are powerfully implicated in the formation and negotiation of gender identity.

This presentation examines one aspect of the nine month study, what membership in the Book Club meant, and follows two members as they use the space and time to negotiate racial and personal identities through interaction with texts and collaboration through talk with other Book Club members.

It has been suggested that girls who go against the conventional views of womanhood, which include traditional characteristics of kindness, cooperation, passivity, denial of one's own needs (Lyons, 1990) at the point at which they begin adolescence and enter the larger world of secondary school, may disconnect from the accepted life experiences for women (Brown, 1991). Studies of early adolescent girls have documented the loss of self esteem that may result from this disjuncture (AAUW, 1991; Orenstein, 1994). Building on the findings of these studies, the Book Club research looked at ways girls might connect to their own stories and negotiate these gender givens through the exploration of and response to fictional girls' narratives.

The girls Brown and Lyons describe in their studies were primarily white; many of them were privileged students in independent schools, as were the participants in the study described here. However, the Book Club was racially diverse, with two African American members, two girls of Hispanic background, one interracial member and three European American girls.

Allison, almost 13, and European American, fits the portrait of the girl who becomes disconnected from her own knowledge and experience.

Her teacher describes her to me:

> very shy, quiet girl, excellent writer and excellent student. Never spoke for the first half of the year. She really didn't speak. . . . I know she used to preface her remarks by "I'm not sure this is right," "I don't know..."

In Allison's own words,

> I don't really talk that much... That was the main thing they wrote on my report cards: "Allison does very well, but should be contributing more." I got good grades. I got all A's. I just don't talk that much.

Yet Allison, a serious, passionate member of the Book Club, had a need to negotiate and remake her own identity, as a girl, as a member of her religious community, and a person without a father.

Allison joined Book Club in the 7th session, but despite her newness, her low, serious voice could frequently be heard in the discussions. Results of tabulating the utterances of the final 10 sessions in which she participated, reveal her voice to be the second most frequent girl's voice. She spoke in interviews of not wanting to join an all-girls' group, of finding it a put down at first. As the sessions continued, she began to use the safe place of Book Club to explore personal issues.

In the 11th session, the girls wrote a letter to their favorite character at the beginning of the meeting, and then shared them by reading aloud. Allison was the only one who refused to read hers, hastily handing her piece of paper to me. She had written to Phyllisia, the main character in The Friends (Guy):

> I usually never cry over books or movies, but this time I did. I guess I did cry because I could relate to you. I hate telling people this and I couldn't even get up the nerve to tell Sally this (who is going to read this) but not my mother but my father died when I was 5. I really thought you handled everything well, considering. I loved the part where you had the conversation with your mother before she died. I was kind of envious of you because you got that chance. I didn't.

Allison goes on to explain that her father had died suddenly; then she explores and questions Phyllisia's actions toward her best friend and her father, and her sister at her mother's funeral. She later revealed in an interview that only a few of her new classmates knew that her father had died, that she constantly

thought about it but could not talk to anyone about it.

In her second piece of writing, a response to the novel Phoenix Rising (Hesse) she also explores the main character's feelings about death:

> I, personally, don't take dying that well. I usually question and hate it. In the book, Nyle (the main character) didn't show this, not that I could tell of. But the author managed to say that she did cry....

In discussions of the book she follows up on this theme (15th session)

> When he was talking to Nyle, like when he was in the hospital, or whatever? He said, how he was glad, that she read the letter. I just thought it was like, really - and in all the books we read, like they all, like in The Friends, Phyllisia got to talk to her Mom before she died, and um, Nyle got to talk to Ezra, and Ezra, seemed like he knew he was going to die, and he knew right then that he was dying, that it was going to happen right now...and it seemed that, it seemed that, I don't know. *She* took it pretty well, and I was , I was waiting for her to cry, at some point, cause I knew that she liked him a lot, and towards the end - I thought, *she cried.* (Laughs a little)
>
> I: (another student) I think she kind of, *expected* it? For him to die, like at the very beginning, she thought he was going to, but then when he got better, she got her hopes up, but then he died. So, she was kind of already prepared. She was like, more prepared...
>
> A: She was, and Ezra knew more than, about it, than her. Cause the letter that he wrote to her?
>
> I: Oh yeah...
>
> A: Like he knew, just so much. And that she felt like, 'Oh God, he's just going to die on me, forget it,' And he was like, he was kind of prepared too, cause he knew what Nyle was thinking about him. And then, I don't know.....(Her voice trails off)

In a session (11) in which The Friends is being discussed, the girls are confused about a flashback that occurs during the funeral:

> A:I have...I remember conversations...
>
> I: =When I think about my grandfather? I like remember the times sometimes that I was cursing, and he's ' Did you say what I thought you said!'
>
> A: Yeah, but it's hard to understand, because she has this conversation, and then the next thing it says that she was dead, and then it goes on, and...
>
> M: (another student) Yeah, cause, 'What happened?" or how did it happen...
>
> A: Well I think it's good, cause she gets you to want to know all of those questions, like... 'My God, she died! Well how'd she die, and when...'

In one -on- one interviews, and in letters to me that continue over the summer, Allison continued to explore this theme of loss, and who she is - a daughter with no father, a girl with no voice in the larger world.

This portrait of Allison, an early adolescent girls who does not speak in the larger world but is finding her voice in the safe space of the group, is only part of the story of adolescence. This story is made more complex with the differential findings of studies of girls of color. Researchers suggest that an African American girl learns to maintain her own voice and a resistance to both gender and racial stereotypes due to a sense of competence and independence nurtured during adolescence, both from role models within the family and community, and from awareness of strong females in history (AAUW, 1991; Smith, 1982, Ward, 1990). Luann, a Book Club member from the first session, an African American in a predominantly white school, continually spoke of her family's support. For our last session, she

wrote: "Even though I go to a predominantly white school, my race and my past is (sic) constantly instilled in me." She also spoke of her independent reading, which included biographies and fiction which focused on Black characters and leaders, and which positioned her to read in a resistant way. This support outside of school may enable girls like Luann to develop strategies for continuing resistance (hooks, 1984; Ladner, 1971; Ward, 1990).

However, researchers who have followed academically successful girls have found that high achieving female students of any color tended to lose this strong sense of voice in the academy (Fordham, 1993). Whether the middle or high school is a mainstream private school or a local public school, "good," academically successful girls may be alienated from their cultural communities, described by Fordham as their "fictive kinship system" (pp. 10-11). As discussions with Book Club girls and a look at the middle school-high school demographics show, with only 3 people of color among a staff of 58, students of color had few adults from their cultural communities to whom they could turn. Many of the academically successful girls in Fordham's study acknowledged that this new found silence represented a change from the way they once behaved in school. Connections to the cultural communities of students of color in the form of role models, clubs, (Ward, 1990) "safe spaces," (Pastor, McCormick, and Fine in press) and curriculum that reflects and engages these students (Fine and Zane, 1992) may contribute to their psychological health and connectedness. The format of an after school Book Club provided a safe space and an agenda, or curriculum, that engaged both white students and students of color, and enabled them to reflect on their identities.

Luann used the Book Club to explore her own identity as a person of color in an essentially white environment, and her ability to successfully negotiate her two worlds. Unlike most of her classmates, she lives far from the school in a middle class Black neighborhood. As she told me in an interview:

> And when I'm here I talk one way, and then at home, I get into the other way. Like when I leave here, I'm still talking like this, but by the time I'm home, I'm talking like me, like my family.

Luann did speak up in class also, and was described by her homeroom and language arts teacher as "vocal, with a lot to say." She herself said:

> I think the girls are better than the boys in terms of intelligence. (snickers from several) I'm not being funny about that, I'm serious, and so, we usually dominate the class, and the boys are just doing that to get attention, but we're busy answering the difficult and hard questions.

She was able to bring her issues and difficult and hard questions to the Book Club, moving from the texts to her own questions. Referring a novel by Woodson, she says, in the 9th session:

> L: I think that in Maison At Blue Hill, like, I don't consider myself as an 'oreo,' or that kind of person, but Pauli...Pauli's the girl that um, like that all the Black girls don't like, cause she acts, she acts like she's white..
>
> N: What are you talking about?
>
> M: This character, she's Black, but she acts white, but this other Black girl, they don't *hate* her, but they want all the Black girls to stay together...
>
> L: I feel a little bit bad, cause at times I actually feel like Pauli. I thought of myself as Pauli, because for a while, I like didn't hang out, I mean I hung out with Tara, but that was the only person I hung out with, from my race? And so, I somehow would not hang out with her - not because I didn't like you! (turns to Tara) But because like *other* people, and because you have to look at the school, what's it like, cause it wasn't a *mixed* school. So have to either choose in the clique, or not to be in it, and I want to be by myself sometimes, so I...

T: You don't act white...

L: Well, sometimes I act it, when I'm just fooling around...

Later, as we are discussing stereotypes in Roll of Thunder,Hear My Cry (Taylor) she says:

> L: And I have a question. I know it's off this subject. Like let's pretend you were Black, and a person, even in music, called you 'Nigger.' How would you feel?

This question was followed by a long conversation about voice, behavior and perceptions of different racial and cultural groups, veering far from the texts, but allowing Luann and other members of the group to listen to one another and clarify or remake their own identities as white, Hispanic, or Black. Luann often used humor to insert her own point of view, and to maintain her relationships with her white friends. For example, in the 9th session, several girls, including her close friend Allison are talking about discomfort with the term "Black" :

> A: ....When I'm friends, I don't think like race comes into my mind, like when I describe, I hate saying, like I say they're dark skinned, I don't say they're Black....
>
> Luann: They're very tanned...

While she contributed an "unofficial" point of view, she also provided a framework for her white and Hispanic peers in the group to rethink their own views, in a way that I, a white facilitator, could not.

Feminist theorists have criticized such examples of authenticity and student voice (Ellsworth, 1992; Luke and Gore, 1992; Orner, 1992) because they are based on essentialist positions which conflict with a constructivist approach to subjectivity. These and other researchers contend that because of the multiple voices and contradictions that are present in a certain place at a certain moment, there are

times when it is not safe for students to speak, even when in the presence of teachers enlightened by critical educational theories (Cherland, 1994). Yet preliminary analysis of the data of this study, as well as my own presence as a participant researcher, point to Book Club as a site where early adolescent girls were able to raise their own agenda and negotiate their issues and identities, within the multiple positions of race and age and culture, when the variable of gender was removed.

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